

# THE PSALM THAT NEVER ENDS

PSALM 136 NOVEMBER 1, 2020

As children we're much more comfortable with constant repetition than we are when we get older. Kids will watch the same movie over and over again. They like to have the same books read to them again and again. It's true with songs, too. I'm sure most of us can think of a time when our parents had to put a moratorium on *99 Bottles Of Beer On The Wall* or *The Wheels On The Bus* or *This Is The Song That Never Ends*. Remember that song from the old *Lamb Chop* show? By the way, you can go on YouTube and watch a video that loops that song for 10 hours straight. 3.2 million views so far.<sup>1</sup>

But our interest and even tolerance for repetition starts to fade over time. Sometimes we just tune it out. Like all those lists of prescription drug side effects or when you're at an amusement park or on an airplane and they go over the safety stuff. "I've heard it once, I don't need to hear it again."

Repetition has long been an issue of debate when it comes to worship styles in the church. One of the criticisms that has been around for decades is that many modern worship choruses are too repetitive and, therefore, are not as legitimate, meaningful or spiritual as densely worded hymns.

Like most debates of that nature, it does no good to make a sweeping generalization. Some of the worship offered in the Bible is *very* repetitive. The most pointed example is in Revelation 4 where we see angelic beings constantly singing a three line song over and over, never stopping day or night.

Another example is set before us this morning. Psalm 136 is a unique and important song but it is *very* repetitive. 26 times the same line is repeated. Not only that, but a lot of Psalm 136 is actually a repetition of what you find in Psalm 135! If we're not careful, we might come across this lovely song but start to think of it as those disclaimers we hear on commercials. "Just get through it and on to something I can connect with."

But God's Word contains no waste. There's no fat in the Psalms. This song has been recorded and preserved and delivered to us because it is God's opinion that we *need* it. There are *some* times when repetition is welcome and necessary. I, for one, am glad that the Miranda rights are explained each time it is necessary. Or think of chest compressions during CPR. There's no thought of getting annoyed at *that* repetition. There's no number that's "too many" in a situation like that.

In Psalm 136 there's something God wants you to repeat to yourself and to the world at large over and over again: That His faithful love endures forever. As the song is sung we're taken from creation, through history and on into eternity. But, after each phrase we're reminded again: His faithful love endures forever. Your translation may have the word "lovingkindness" or "mercy" instead of love. The term being used is the Hebrew word "hesed." Hesed is a kind of personal, affectionate love that is covenantal in nature. It's not just about someone liking someone for a time or having a friendliness toward another person. It is a love so deep and so active that it brings two parties into a living relationship, full of promises and tenderness and kindness.<sup>2</sup> It's a relationship where a stronger Person protects a weaker person, not just out of duty or obligation, but out of a faithful generosity. That is a glimpse of how the Bible describes God's love for you. This devoted love of hesed is one of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0U2zJOryHKQ>

<sup>2</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

the most important terms and ideas in all the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> It is strong and gracious and everlasting and it is directed toward you.

Psalm 136 is not only meant to proclaim the greatness of God but also to remind us of many of the aspects of God's love and to remind us that, no matter what we face, God's love is sure and is in operation in our lives.

The song opens by calling us to *celebrate* God's goodness.

**Psalm 136:1 - <sup>1</sup> Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His faithful love endures forever.**

In the worship services of Israel, it's believed the priest would say the first half of each verse and then the Levitical choir or the congregation of the people (or perhaps both) would sing the refrain "His faithful love endures forever."

From the start we're reminded that God is *good*. Whether sung after a triumph or in the middle of exile, Psalm 136:1 remains the same. God's goodness and compassion rests on all He has made.

Commentators often cite this quote of Charles Spurgeon which puts God's goodness in perspective:

*"He is good beyond all others; indeed, he alone is good in the highest sense; he is the source of good, the good of all good, the sustainer of good, the perfecter of good, and the rewarder of good. For this he deserves the constant gratitude of his people."*<sup>4</sup>

We're heading into the Thanksgiving season. Maybe you have a tradition of going around the table and offering something you're thankful for. What we're invited to do here is *more* than that. To "give thanks" in verse 1 means a specific gathering to sing together as God's people.<sup>5</sup> It means to worship with raised hands.<sup>6</sup> Have you ever wondered why people sometimes raise their hands while they sing worship songs? It's a Biblical activity.

To give thanks means to "make a public confession of the attributes and acts of power of [God]." This is yet another reason why it *is* essential for the local church to come together and not *just* gather, but *sing* together. God commands it and He *deserves* it. How could we *not* respond in thankful praise, knowing how good He is? Imagine you leave here and are hit by a car. A stranger comes up, keeps you alive through CPR, tends to your wounds, pays your bills till you are well, then writes you a check for a million dollars. Would you refuse to thank him? That hypothetical isn't even *close* to what God has done for us in saving us from our sin and bringing us into His family.

The question is: Have you tasted and seen that the Lord is good? You do so by *trusting* in Him. If you have not taken refuge in His salvation, then you don't know about His goodness. But He is ready to receive you today if you, by faith, turn from your sin and believe in Him.

After a call to *celebrate*, we're shown some of God's *character*.

**Psalm 136:2 - <sup>2</sup> Give thanks to the God of gods. His faithful love endures forever.**

<sup>3</sup> *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*

<sup>4</sup> Charles Spurgeon *The Treasury Of David*

<sup>5</sup> *DBL Hebrew*

<sup>6</sup> *Strongs*

When comparing the God of the Bible to the gods of all other cultures and religions, we have a lot to be thankful for. Those gods are in competition with one another. Those gods can often be corrupted or bought off. They are impatient and cruel. They make sport of human beings. Not so our God, the One *true* God. He has no rival in strength or generosity. There is no worry that He might ever be defeated or incapacitated in any way. No new contender will ever arise and take His place.

**Psalm 136:3 - <sup>3</sup> Give thanks to the Lord of lords. His faithful love endures forever.**

Not only is God God, He is also Lord. Meaning He is the Ruler of all things. He is the Master. He decides and it is done. And His decisions flow from His unending love. If you are a Christian that means that God has bought you back from the Devil, who *was* your master. The Lord paid with His own blood. And now this good and loving Master gives you *freedom* in His Spirit. He's brought us into His household where we're able to share in our Lord's joy. In Him there is no reason to fear, no condemnation. Instead the Psalms say goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives.

Most of you have had both good bosses and bad bosses. Think of how much *that* matters in your day to day life. Now let us consider that on the far greater level, Satan *was* our master. His purpose was to kill, steal and destroy - to ruin us in every way. Now, in Christ we have a Master who emptied Himself, took the form of a servant and died a horrible death so we might have a chance to be saved from that ruin. There's so much to be thankful for.

From God's character, the Psalm now turns to consider His acts in *creation*.

**Psalm 136:4-6 - <sup>4</sup> He alone does great wonders. His faithful love endures forever.**

**<sup>5</sup> He made the heavens skillfully. His faithful love endures forever.**

**<sup>6</sup> He spread the land on the waters. His faithful love endures forever.**

Often when we think of God's "wonders" we jump immediately to the miraculous signs recorded in the Bible. But in view here are the fantastic marvels of creation. Look in any direction. Use a telescope or a microscope<sup>7</sup> and see what He's done. Job says "He hangs the earth on nothing." Colossians 1 tells us that He "holds all creation together (ESV)." Did you know that scientists estimate that there are more atoms in a single drop of water as there are stars in the universe?<sup>8</sup>

The universe God created is not just *large*, it is *skillfully* made. It's meticulously fine-tuned for a specific purpose: To sustain life that He might place human beings on the planet earth, show them His love and so everywhere they look they can see a testimony of His power and grace. From the land you stand on to the rotation of the earth, it all declares God's glory, but it is meant to be a stage on which we can *live* so that we might *know* God and receive His love. None of His creative work is slipshod or haphazard. And He keeps all of creation in balance in order to accomplish His purposes in *your* life.

**Psalm 136:7-9 - <sup>7</sup> He made the great lights: His faithful love endures forever.**

**<sup>8</sup> the sun to rule by day, His faithful love endures forever.**

**<sup>9</sup> the moon and stars to rule by night. His faithful love endures forever.**

<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon *Treasury Of David*

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thoughtco.com/atoms-in-a-drop-of-water-609425> <https://www.dailyherald.com/submitted/20180430/how-many-stars-in-the-universe->

I don't find myself often being thankful for the sun, especially not during our Valley summers. But think of what God has provided for us out there 93 million miles away. This bright star that brings us light and warmth. It causes the plants to grow, gives us vitamins that we need. It boosts our serotonin and reduces our stress.<sup>9</sup>

If I take the sun for granted, I am even *more* thoughtless of the moon. At the breakfast table the other day we got into a discussion with the kids about what would happen if we had no moon. There's actually some research on that question. First of all, without electricity or fire, the night would be so dark you wouldn't be able to see your own hand in front of your face.<sup>10</sup> The earth would spin *much* faster, meaning our days would only be between 6 and 12 hours. And the tilt of the earth would become unstable, eventually leading to either *no* seasons at all, or wildly *extreme* seasons that would threaten life.

Our God has been amazingly generous in His meticulous design. He did it all to show you His love.

The Psalm now turns from *creation* to *conquest* in verses 10 through 22.

**Psalm 136:10-12 - <sup>10</sup> He struck the firstborn of the Egyptians His faithful love endures forever. <sup>11</sup> and brought Israel out from among them His faithful love endures forever. <sup>12</sup> with a strong hand and outstretched arm. His faithful love endures forever.**

How can these judgments *possibly* show God's loving mercy? In fact, the story of the Exodus does show many important aspects of God's love. First of all, that He is mindful of the suffering of His people. He knows every single thing that every single one of us is going through. And He will do whatever is necessary to rescue us from our foes. Second, though His love is everlasting, He is not blind to sin and injustice. He *will* judge those who refuse to acknowledge Him and receive His mercy. Because the wages of sin *is* death, both for nations and for individuals. All along the way, God *repeatedly* gave Pharaoh and Egypt the chance to do what was right. In the end many Egyptians *did* leave with the Israelites and were received with welcome. This example demonstrates that God will never *force* His powerful, everlasting love on anyone. You must choose whether you will accept it or reject it. And it's a choice between life and death.

**Psalm 136:13-15 - <sup>13</sup> He divided the Red Sea His faithful love endures forever. <sup>14</sup> and led Israel through, His faithful love endures forever. <sup>15</sup> but hurled Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea. His faithful love endures forever.**

We talked about the meticulously fine-tuned nature of God's creation. But throughout the Bible we see that it *still* gives way to His command. The wind and the waves still obey Him. More importantly, though *death* is one of the most 'natural' things of all, one day He will say "Rise." And the grave will yield to Him and we will live forever with our Lord.

**Psalm 136:16-20 - <sup>16</sup> He led his people in the wilderness. His faithful love endures forever. <sup>17</sup> He struck down great kings His faithful love endures forever. <sup>18</sup> and slaughtered famous kings—His faithful love endures forever. <sup>19</sup> Sihon king of the Amorites His faithful love endures forever. <sup>20</sup> and Og king of Bashan—His faithful love endures forever.**

<sup>9</sup> <https://selecthealth.org/blog/2020/07/7-health-benefits-of-sunlight>

<sup>10</sup> <https://nineplanets.org/questions/what-would-happen-if-there-was-no-moon/>

One of the greatest marvels of God's love is that He remains faithful even when we do not. Those wilderness years were marked by complaining and rebellion and disobedience and disbelief. And yet, God *endured* with them. We have our own share of shortcomings, missteps, doubts and failures. God will not cast us off. His love for you does not ebb. It's always at high tide.

Something else to consider from this recounting of Israeli history: They had been delivered from bondage in Egypt, the world's greatest military power conquered by God. But, you know what? There is always *another* enemy. Another king coming in opposition. Maybe from the Amorites. Maybe from Bashan. Luckily, God is enough to bring us through. We're headed into an election this week. The world wants us to be afraid, one way or another. As Christians, we don't hang our hopes on the outcome of *one* battle. There's always another ahead, anyway. Instead, all our hope is in our Lord and His perfect love. He is our Refuge and Shepherd and we can trust wherever He leads us.

**Psalm 136:21-22 - <sup>21</sup> and gave their land as an inheritance, His faithful love endures forever. <sup>22</sup> an inheritance to Israel his servant. His faithful love endures forever.**

The story of Israel is a story of God keeping His promises. He will *still* keep His promises to them because His love endures forever - for them and for us. His promise to you includes a heavenly inheritance, priceless and unspoiled by thieves or economic downturns. It's more than a monthly check, it is an eternal Kingdom<sup>11</sup> of blessing and glory and reward. Today, we have the chance to *add* to that inheritance as we serve God and glorify Him through our lives and worship. As the Israelites were invited to cultivate the land of Canaan, we are invited to join the Lord in His work and receive a rich future reward for what we've done when the Master returns.

From *conquest*, the Psalm now turns to God's love in the midst of present *crisis*.

**Psalm 136:23-24 - <sup>23</sup> He remembered us in our humiliation His faithful love endures forever. <sup>24</sup> and rescued us from our foes. His faithful love endures forever.**

The song has talked in cosmological terms and historical terms. Now it becomes *personal*. "Our" and "us." Our hurts. Our struggles. All that God has done and all that He is capable of still applies to you and me. His love empowers us to overcome temptation. His love empowers us to be of good cheer, even in the face of humiliation. His love *still* overcomes, *still* makes a way, *still* works its generosity toward God's people all over the earth. He is still a Redeemer and Rescuer.

**Psalm 136:25 - <sup>25</sup> He gives food to every creature. His faithful love endures forever.**

In theology there is something known as 'common grace.' Meaning that God, because He is so compassionate, allows the rain to fall on the wicked and the good. The sun shines on Christians and non-Christians alike. Everyone here, whether you belong to Christ or not, is given the perpetual gift of breath and a beating heart. That is a *lavish* generosity. But are you a member of His family? Only through faith in Jesus Christ can a person find refuge and forgiveness and salvation. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life and no one goes to the Father but through Him. You may enjoy God's common grace today, but it will all be a waste if you aren't born again. If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. God has love for you, more than you could possibly know. Don't refuse it today.

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<sup>11</sup> James 2:5

**Psalm 136:26 - <sup>26</sup> Give thanks to the God of heaven! His faithful love endures forever.**

Have brought us through thousands of years of history and into our own present experience, the song ends as it began: Calling us to praise and worship and thankfulness for God's unfailing love. In this closing verse we're reminded that there is an eternal future waiting for us. Heaven is just as real as earth. In fact, those who will spend eternity there will be more alive, more whole, more overjoyed than any of us has ever experienced in this life.

At awards shows, sometimes the acceptance speeches are full of mechanical thank-yous to various production companies and staff. But *sometimes* you see the winners overcome with excitement and emotion at what they've just received. They talk about feeling unworthy and so lucky to lay hold to such an honor. Maybe you're not facing some sort of great foe or adversity or fear today. Think of the incredible gifts God has given. Consider the powerful, generous love of God and allow your heart to overflow with thankful praise.

But maybe you're not in a time of wonder. Maybe you find yourself more in a time of humiliation. Maybe you're afraid of what's going to happen in your life or in our nation in the coming days. Maybe you feel like you're caught between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea, seeing no way out of some trouble you're in.

I was reminded of that iconic scene in *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*. The Whos down in Whoville woke one morning to find their homes ransacked and vandalized. Everything they had been so looking forward to had been robbed from them. What happened? The Whos came together to *sing*. A somewhat repetitive song, but one profound enough that it melted the heart of their sworn enemy.

That's a trite comparison to make. But it shows how much *more* is intended by Psalm 136. Whether we find ourselves standing in awe of the wonder of God's majesty, or just wondering how we're going to make it through today, the same truth rings out: His faithful love endures forever. And we should get to singing. Because *that* refrain, *that* promise, isn't a vain repetition. No, it's more like the powerful waves that lap on the shore, hour after hour, day after day. That soothing sound of constancy and strength. From the beginning and to the end of all things, God's love is faithful toward you. And as we sing His praises, our hearts are fortified, our perspective is calibrated and a testimony of His life-saving grace goes out to all the world. This Psalm, known as "The Great Hallel" in Jewish tradition, has been called "The Psalm that never ends." We can keep singing it in our hearts and in our gatherings from now through eternity because God's love never ends. Let's give thanks and get to singing.